

Boys Don't Cry by onehitwunderkind

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Summary: No one was more excited to head off to college than Will Byers. He gets to go to his dream school, live with his best friends, and finally escape his reputation as the resident freak of Hawkins, Indiana. But art school isn't all that he expected.

Boys Don't Cry

[A/N]: Hello everyone! This is my first multi-chapter story I have ever planned on writing. I've had this idea swirling around in my head for a while now and I finally sat down to write it. Just a preliminary note, this is supposed to fit within the canon of the show, but I know most of this will be rendered irrelevant once season 3 comes out. This story is connected to my Jopper one-shot "Moving On and Moving Out," if you would like to read that, but I changed up the style a bit for this one. This is only the second story I have published, and I would love to hear any feedback!

Happy reading!

No one was more excited to head off to college than Will Byers. While all of his friends were eager to escape the literal portal-to-hell-hole that was Hawkins, Indiana, it was he-and he alone-who always knew where he wanted to go. Who begged, and pleaded, and fought his mom. Who ticked the days off the calendar until he got to move in.

For Will, it was less about school and more about leaving Hawkins, or better yet, Indiana. His entire life there had been defined by the labels ascribed to him by the townspeople, his peers, and even his own deadbeat father. To them he would always be "Zombie Boy" or "Freak," no matter how much time had passed since his *incident*.

It was torturous. Some days it was better, and he was almost sure people were starting to forget, but each little whisper or awkward interaction forced him back to reality. It was a painful reminder of all of the trauma that he endured, and tried to desperately to work past, but like his labels, would never truly escape.

There was one other label, one other impetus for leaving, that gnawed at him the most: "Queer." But not in the ugly, derogatory way that his school bullies said it to his face or the quiet, angry way his father said it behind his back. Will knew he felt differently from the rest of his friends in terms of girls at a relatively young age, but it didn't bother him all that much until people started calling him

names. Bad names. It made him feel like there was something to be ashamed of and he didn't understand why. Then all of a sudden, he was too preoccupied with being trapped in a dark dimension and possessed by a shadow monster to be thinking about love.

Once he got to high school, however, he was confronted once again by the raging hormones controlling everyone around him, especially his friends. He avoided girls who had crushes on him, and stifled any feelings he felt developing for guys. Besides, *what could he do?* He lived in Middle of Nowhere, U.S.A, population: Everyone Who Would Have Voted for Reagan for a Third Term. There was a depressing lack of cute guys in Hawkins, let alone ones that would be interested in him, and he knew wouldn't be able to handle the backlash if he ever came out publicly.

The only people who knew were the only people that ever mattered to him: his family (sans Lonnie) and the Party, and they made him feel loved and accepted without question.

The answer to Will's precarious situation occurred to him on a visit to see his brother at NYU when he was 14. Within five minutes of walking down the crowded, rat-infested streets, he had seen more types of people-unique people, different people-than he had ever seen in his entire life. Maybe it was the exhaustion from his long drive, maybe it was a smog-induced fantasy, but it was the most beautiful thing Will Byers had witnessed.

From that point on, he had his answer. He began devising a plan to get out of Hawkins for college, and hopefully, the rest of his life. He knew NYU was too much of a stretch for his mother, but Chicago was both close enough for her to feel comfortable and far enough to evade the Hoosiers. Most importantly, it was big enough to where he could fade into the background and for once, be normal. The city also happened to be home to one of the best art schools in the country, the Art Institute of Chicago, which he spent his entire high school career working his ass off to get into.

Luckily, he and his step-sister, El, shared the same infatuation with the city and desire to get the hell out of Hawkins as soon as possible. She told him stories of her fated few days spent in the city with her long-lost sister, Kali, and the absolute awe she felt when she stepped

looked up at the skyscraper-lined starless sky and how the wet pavement sparkled like gold under the illuminated street lamps. *Well*, she didn't say that in so many words, but Will just knew.

Even more luckily, El's stories also captivated the attention of his best friend and her boyfriend, Mike Wheeler. They had all agreed to apply to schools greater Chicago area, and each were accepted into their school of choice: El at Columbia College, Mike at Northwestern, and Will at the Art Institute. And just like that, he was going to live with his two favorite people in the world for the next four years. He was starting to believe that maybe life was looking up for him after all. That maybe, after all his years of neglectful fathers, inter-dimensional demons, and helicopter parenting, he was finally getting a break.

He was wrong.

No one was more excited to go to college than Will Byers. And now, no one was dreading their first college party more than him.

"Will, you look amazing!" El pleaded to him.

"No-there's something off, I just don't know what it is," he muttered, frustrated as he adjusted himself in the mirror, before taking off his shirt and tossing it into the reject pile, resulting in a resounding groan from El and Mike. He had tried on about five different outfits, stared at himself in the mirror for ten minutes in each, before deeming each of them too lame, too ugly, too small-town-boy to wear to his first art school party.

From his first week of classes, he observed that most of his peers were impeccably dressed, inconceivably wealthy, and incredibly confident in themselves (maybe even a little too much). And just as he had feared, he stuck out like a sore thumb. The people in his classes were nice enough, especially the tall Debbie Harry look-alike, Natasha, who invited him to the party. But no matter how kind they were during their interactions, he couldn't elude the feeling of inferiority that plagued him.

He was, after all, a plucky import from a place they had never heard of, wearing hand-me-downs from his brother that fit a little too loosely for his thin frame and had barely been outside of his dumpy

hometown, much less to Paris or Milan. It was clear to most of the Old Money, cigarette-smoking, yuppy-spawn at school that he was different from them, and it made him feel like the small, dorky kid he had been back in Hawkins.

Will picked another shirt, this time a black-and-white tee with from his favorite band, The Clash, and held it up to his shoulders in the mirror and mumbled, "Oh, what's the use?" before throwing it into the reject pile.

"None of these are going to work," Will conceded as he plopped down on the edge of the bed next to Mike and El.

"Well, look on the bright side," Mike replied, "at least you don't have that dumb bowl cut anymore."

El smacked Mike in the stomach, which elicited an *oof* in response.

"Sorry, dude," Mike apologized, "but I guess I don't see what the problem is. You never really cared about your clothes before."

"You wouldn't understand...you're you," Will responded.

As much as he loved his friend, Will was not the biggest fan of his closet, which apparently consisted of striped t-shirts and fuzzy sweaters for as long as he could remember. Not that it mattered to Mike anyway, he didn't have to impress a bunch of artsy rich kids, and he had someone who loved the way he dressed no matter how bad it was.

"What, you don't like my style, Byers? I'm offended," Mike retorted playfully.

"That's not what I meant. It's just...I don't know," Will trailed off.

"Well I, for one, love your clothes," El said to Mike, putting her head on his shoulder and batting her eyelashes at him.

"And that's all I need," Mike grinned before kissing her quickly on the lips.

Will groaned. As much as he loved the two of them and knew how

much they deserved to be happy, he still felt a pang of jealousy when they showed affection like this. He spent the entirety of his adolescent life repressing any romantic feelings he ever had, never kissing anyone, and wondering if he would ever get to have a love like them.

That was, in part, why he was so anxious over his clothing choices today. He finally had the chance to meet a guy who wouldn't know anything about his terrible past, and who might possibly like him back. He wanted to put his best foot forward, so that maybe, just maybe, he could catch someone's attention, but he wasn't sure where to even start.

"Hellooooo. Having a crisis here," Will said loudly, waving his hands in front of the faces of his two starry-eyed friends.

"Right, sorry," Mike exhaled as they both snapped out of their lovesick gazes.

"What are you so worried about, anyway?" El questioned.

Looking like a loser. Eating lunch in the bathroom stall because I never made any friends in college. Dying alone.

"Nothing," Will answered, "You just haven't *seen* these people, okay? They're all so...glamorous and confident, and I'm just...me."

"Will," Mike said seriously, taking Will by the shoulders. "You are the best friend I've ever had, and the coolest person I've ever known."

El quirked an eyebrow.

"Well, *one* of the coolest people I know. You have the best music taste, and Jesus, dude you've risen from the dead multiple times, and I'll bet those guys aren't half as talented as you or half as confident as you think they are," Mike said earnestly.

Mike was right. Despite his lack of self-confidence, Will was one of the most talented artists in the small freshman class. He received a full-ride scholarship due in part to his financial need and exceptional GPA, but mostly because he was a wonderful artist. He always had been for as long as anyone could remember. It was a fact that his

peers had taken notice of as well during their first week and were intimidated by, though Will never would have noticed.

"And you're the best brother I've ever had!" El chimed in.

"I'll make sure to let Jonathan know," Will laughed.

"So don't worry about some dumb old t-shirt, okay?"

"Okay."

If they were good for anything besides making a killer breakfast, it was pep talks. Will was starting to think maybe he was overreacting after all. Besides, he wants someone to like him for *him*, dorky clothes and all.

El hoisted herself up from the bed and began rummaging through Will's closet before pulling out a black Pixies t-shirt with white text he bought at their concert in New York that summer. It was bold, but not overly so. El dragged him by the arm to stand in front of the mirror.

"No..." Will moaned. "I already said I don't want to wear a band t-shirt."

"Just wait," El commanded before turning back to sort through more hangers and muttering to herself, "and...here it is!"

From the back of his closet emerged a black leather jacket with little colorful pins adorning the collar. Jonathan and Nancy had gifted it to him for his seventeenth birthday, and it had been sitting in his closet ever since. Truthfully, he loved the way it looked, but he was too fearful of drawing attention to himself with a change of style back in Hawkins that he even attempted to wear it.

"I can't wear that!" Will exclaimed.

"Put it on," El demanded. Will's eyes darted to Mike's in desperation.

"You heard the lady, Byers."

Will grumbled, refusing to look at the mirror as he put on the shirt

first, then the jacket. He immediately felt *different*. Different from the feel of his usual clothes. Different in his own skin.

"Wow. You look..." El said with a touch of awe in her voice.

Will looked up at his reflection. He was amazed. He *actually* looked kind of...

"*Bitchin'*." Mike finished, nodding his head in approval.

[A/N]: Thanks for reading! I had so much fun writing this chapter and I'm excited to see where this story goes. Let me know what you think!